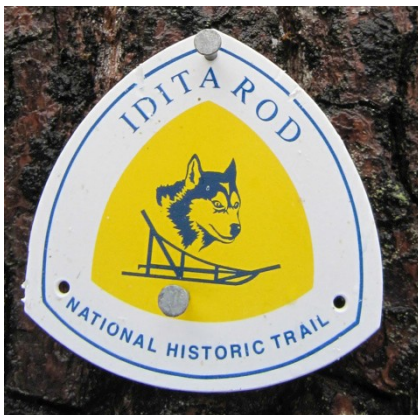


WILD AND AWARE

Girdwood Elementary School, Girdwood, Alaska

Nestled at the entrance to a small valley, the coastal village of Girdwood, Alaska, had a problem. Every summer bears came out of the mountains and into Girdwood in search of easy food. Girdwood first grade teacher Joslyn Stinson and second grade teacher Christi Davidson decided to do something about it. They empowered their students to use what they had learned in the classroom about bears to change public attitudes and behaviors of the people in their community. They didn't work alone. They partnered with the Anchorage Bear Committee (ABC), an interagency group working to minimize human-bear conflicts in the Anchorage area, to try a pilot educational project. If successful, the educational campaign could be replicated in other parts of the municipality.



Evolution of a Project

"We met members of the Bear Committee at an iTREC! Training," Christi said. "Joslyn mentioned her interest in bears and the partnership was born."

"Having an authentic need was crucial," said Joslyn. "Being given the freedom to guide the kids to address the need was really important."

Changing Attitudes

At the start of their bear unit, Joslyn and Christi discovered that most of their students glorified killing bears and saw bears primarily as pests. They worked with their students to help them learn more about bear natural history. They had their students share bear stories, writing out their own experiences encountering bears. When they had the kids graph their stories afterward, the students were surprised to discover how many took place in people's neighborhoods and involved bears getting into trash or food stored outside homes.

"The kids figured it out on their own that food and trash were the problem, not bears," reported Christi. "That was very empowering."

The Partners' Vital Role

Bear Committee members, including biologists from the US Forest Service and Alaska Department of Fish and Game, came to the teachers' classrooms. These

scientists reinforced what the kids had already figured out: Girdwood didn't have a bear problem, it had a people problem. The biologists encouraged the students to make a difference by helping educate people about the ways they could keep bears from getting into food in town, and the ways they should behave to be safer around bears when out on the trails. The students gladly took on the challenge!

The Power of Student Voices

With guidance from their teachers, first graders threw themselves into writing PSAs for the local radio station; second graders focused on drawing pictures to convey key bear safety messages. Staff from the Anchorage School District's STEM department helped the students as they worked on their messages. One of the local radio station personalities gave hours of time to help the first graders record their PSAs. Staff from Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, all Bear Committee members, helped the students hone their messages. They also stepped up to help get the kids' messages out on a much larger scale. They began to help plan a community-wide education campaign in the community.

In April, timed to coincide with the waking of bears from their winter sleep, the students launched their education campaign in a special "Bear Aware Week" in Girdwood. The local hotel hosted a kick-off reception for the project, complete with mounted student artwork, student performances of their PSAs, and free buttons and magnets bearing the kids' designs. The Conservation Center had approached the hotel to provide the reception space; ADF&G turned the student artwork into buttons and magnets; and the Forest Service helped mount student artwork for display. The Forest Service also hosted an open house during the week and held clinics to teach people about bear spray, bear-resistant food containers, and electric fences. The Wildlife Conservation Center also opened its gates one day during the week so people could see live brown and black bears. The PSAs aired all summer long on the local radio station and the feedback was very positive.

Outcomes

It's still too early to tell what effects the students' efforts have had changing attitudes and behavior in the broader community. The students themselves view bears differently and they feel responsible for them now.

"After this unit, ALL of my students had examples of what they could do differently to protect bears and keep themselves safe," said Joslyn.

An Ongoing Educational Effort

Thanks to this partnership, Bear Aware Week has endured and is expanding. The project has also fostered deeper working relationships between the partner organizations. And the partners have been working together to further expand the reach of the kids' work, pushing organizers of the community's annual summer fair to adopt more bear aware practices. And everyone is already looking forward to next year. It appears that the kids of Girdwood may have institutionalized an annual celebration to remind everyone of their responsibility to keep Girdwood "wild and aware."

Web Links:

- The Event in 2012: <http://www.myalaskaforests.com/2012/04/wild-aware-girdwoodtwo-bear-week-april.html>
- The event in 2013: <http://www.myalaskaforests.com/2013/04/wild-aware-girdwood-bear-events.html>
- Wild & Aware Girdwood: <http://wildaware.org/>
- Kids artwork: <http://wildaware.org/art-gallery>
- Article in the Turnagain Times:
<http://www.turnagaintimes.com/current%20issue/2013-05-02/bear-aware-week.html>